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21. GROUP FISHING OF HOUSE CROWS (*CORVUS SPLENDENS*) WITH RIVER TERNS (*STERNA AURANTIA*)

(With one plate)

On July 6, 2000, during a visit to Bigwan, Indapur taluka, Pune district, Maharashtra State for bird watching, I noticed a flock of about 40 river terns (*Sterna aurantia*) and 10 house crows (*Corvus splendens*), flying together at one spot, in the backwaters of Ujani Dam. As I approached closer, I saw fishermen emptying their catch from the nets.

The house crows and river terns were diving for the dead fish, which had fallen from the fishing nets, and were floating on the water. The crows had mastered the technique of hovering and accurately picking up the fish, just like the river tern.

The house crow is not a water bird; whether

this was a natural instinct or it had mastered the technique while observing the river terns is a big question. Crows are known to be territorial and aggressive, but in this case they neither harmed nor quarreled with the terns.

Another observation worth noting was that while the river tern picked up and swallowed the fish in flight the crow would pick up a fish, fly to the shore to eat it, and then fly back to catch another one.

April 12, 2001 SATTYASHEEL N. NAIK
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22. TERNS OF THE VENGURLA ROCKS, A REVIEW AND UPDATE

The breeding colony of maritime terns on the Vengurla Rocks is arguably the Indian subcontinent's most important one, if not for the sheer quantity of nesting birds then for the number of constituent species. Though it has been known for at least 125 years that a ternery exists on Burnt Island, one of the islets forming the Vengurla Rocks, all knowledge about it rested on local lore, second-hand accounts and circumstantial proof. No ornithologist had ever seen terns there before 1981.

The Vengurla Rocks are a tiny archipelago of rock outcrops situated 16.5 km off the South Konkan coast from a point about halfway between Vengurla and Malwan (Sindhudurg district, Maharashtra State, India), situated at 15° 43' 24" N and 73° 27' 42" E. The four largest ones form a group of precipitous rocky islets at a

distance of several hundred metres from each other. Among them, the smallest and westernmost is crowned by the ruins of the old lighthouse. This was replaced around 1935 by a more modern one on the largest of the rocks, manned by a crew of eight that resides on it throughout the year. Burnt Island, the second largest of the islets, lies closest to the mainland. It is about 300 m long, 100 m wide and 30-50 m high, and sparsely covered by coarse grass and a few stunted bushes. The islet remains free from human interference and A.O. Hume's (1876) detailed description is as accurate and valid today as it was 125 years ago.

The group of islets as a whole presents a forbidding aspect, access is limited to the fair season, October to May, and landing is risky even at the best of times. In January 1998, permission given to me to stay at the Inspection Quarters of